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CRYSTAL GAYLE: SUCCESS DIDN'T COME EASY

By JAMES ALBRECHT

Many moons ago, Mrs. Clara Butcher sat hunched over a mound of coffee grounds trying to read what the future had in store for her youngest daughter, Brenda Gail Webb.

Somewhere in the pile of brown mush the coming years spelled out "stardom." But Brenda didn't need her mother's mountain magic to convince her that her name would one day be in lights. She knew it would happen eventually, and it has. Only the name is no longer Brenda Webb—but Crystal Gayle.

"My mother is the main force of my singing," says Crystal, leading lady in both country and pop music. "She always pushed me into singing." However, Crystal wasn't the only one to receive family prodding. Sister Peggy Sue and

brother Jay Lee Webb are also professional country entertainers. And by now most everyone knows Crystal as the kid sister of country queen, Loretta Lynn.

A long while riding in the shadows of Loretta—who gave Crystal her name (after a chain of hamburger joints), a spot on her show at 16, and an immeasurable amount of business help—Crystal has since blossomed to the point of nearly eclipsing Loretta's monumental career. Her Nashville home is lined with awards, including a Grammy for the million-selling "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue" and two Best Female Vocalist of the Year awards from the Country Music Association. Her albums sell in the millions, concerts are generally sell-outs, and now Crystal is being wooed for movie roles and pin-up posters. This

fall she hosts her first TV special, on CBS. In July she became the first American female singer to perform in the People's Republic of Red China as a guest on Bob Hope's TV special "The Road To China."

The China trip was a special thrill. "I loved it," says Crystal, in a voice hoarse from over-singing to compensate for a poor sound system the night before. "One of the things I noticed over there was a lot of people reading and playing games in the street lights. I found out later that this was because a lot of the homes don't have electricity. And this was one of the big cities in China."

"I guess you really don't think about people not having electricity when you have it all the time."

Her impressions of China illustrate the vast difference there is between Crystal Gayle and Loretta Lynn. After all, it wasn't all that long ago when Loretta would marvel at such luxuries as electricity.

Loretta was 16 and the mother of two when Crystal was born in 1951 in the coal mining community of Paintsville, Ky. When the mines dried up, Crystal—the last of eight Webb children—moved with her family to a colony of ex-miners in Wabash, Ind., when she was 4.

"Wabash was by no means a country music town," she relates. "And I'm sure there were a lot of times that I defended my sister and the music I liked. But I liked all types of music. When I was growing up I sang everything from country to pop to show tunes, because I would sing in the high school choir. But country music is what I would perform on weekends for local groups and organizations."

At 16 Crystal joined her sister's road show and upon high school graduation—with a little help from Loretta—landed a deal with Decca Records and cut the modest hit "I Cried The Blue Right Out Of My Eyes" (a song Loretta originally wrote for Brenda Lee "but her eyes were brown").

Switching to United Artists Records in 1973, Crystal was teamed with producer Allen Reynolds, who was instrumental in building the career and sound of Don Williams. Together they found their way into the top of the

country charts with hits like "Restless," "Wrong Road Again," "I'll Get Over You" and "Somebody Loves You."

In 1977 they struck gold with "Brown Eyes," a song which crossed all boundaries and put Crystal on the fringe of superstardom.

With a style that's sophisticated yet soulful, Crystal's sound differs from the straight country of Loretta as much as the metropolis of Wabash, Ind., differs from the rural surroundings of her sister's Butcher Holler birthplace. Crystal's appeal knows no bounds and with each album she establishes herself more as an all-around singer rather than a purely country artist. Now with Columbia Records, her new album, "Miss The Mississippi," should further strengthen her hold on the pop market while maintaining a loyal base in country music.

The crossover move wasn't deliberate, Crystal maintains. In fact, the girl voted most likely to succeed in her high school yearbook is not the over-aggressive type. Rather shy and retiring (another obvious difference from Loretta who "can out-talk me a mile a minute"), Crystal isn't one to engage in long dissertations on her career, either on stage or off. Success is a combination of "good luck and good people" she says, and she's been careful of over-promoting herself or exploiting her relationship with Loretta.

"I guess I don't really want to push my music or my career," she explains. "I just don't want to push it down people's throats. I want it to be there and if they happen to like it, that makes me happy. But I don't want to push it on them so hard that they're turned off by it."

Not many people have been turned off by Crystal Gayle, whose striking attractiveness has made her one of the most in-demand females for television shows. Since "Brown Eyes" her career has rocketed to proportions she never knew possible. She can't even keep up with her own record sales. "I just go out there and sing," she laughs. But despite having a famous sister, whom she admiringly calls "a living legend," it was no overnight success story.

"I've paid my dues," Crystal told CountryStyle. "I worked the road, I don't know how many years, as a single act without a band. You know, you use the pick-up groups, set stage when you get there, work the four

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The most famous siblings in country music, Crystal Gayle and Loretta Lynn have a mutual admiration society. Crystal says she learned the ropes of show business by watching Loretta.





Crystal was "the baby" when she posed (apparently reluctantly) for this family photo. That's Loretta third from right.

Crystal Thrives On Entertaining

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shows in the clubs every night. I've done all that.

"I grew up with Loretta in the business—and very famous in the business. And I always knew I wanted to sing. I didn't really want to do anything else. But I thought it was a lot easier than it is."

Being associated with Loretta has been both a help and a hindrance. It opened doors, but it also brought mixed feelings from those who expected her to follow in Loretta's style, and snarls from peers assuming she was getting breaks simply because of her sister's fame. That bothered Crystal little, however she did scowl on a couple occasions when her billing on the theater marquee read: Crystal Gayle Lynn.

But that was the past. Today she has enough trouble just keeping up with her career. United Artists has taken advantage of her popularity by releasing "We Should Be Together," an album of material Crystal recorded for U.A. during her six years there that never made its way onto albums. The hit single, "Your Kisses Will," was recorded more than three years ago. (Crystal would like fans to know that.)

Success, of course, has meant less time at home—a modest five acre estate outside Nashville—with her husband of eight years, Vassilios Gatzimos, a law student. Crystal and friends call him "Bill."

Bill frequently travels with Crystal, serves unofficially as her manager ("I would call him that," she says. "But he doesn't like to have a label"), and occasionally will curl up with his wife around a guitar and write a song. But even those times are becoming less frequent.

"Yeah," says Crystal, "those were the good days when we had a lot of time just to sit around and do that."

"You look back on everything as the good days. College days—when Bill was going to college and I wasn't working a lot then—we had a lot of time. We went to the movies a lot."

"Sometimes you want it to slow down. We haven't really taken time off to go on a vacation. We were going to, but China came up. I've been to Europe, I don't know how many times. Bill has been to Europe. But we've never gone together."

"It's weird. I don't like it."

As with vacations, re-decorating and songwriting, other plans must be postponed.

"I want children," says Crystal. "But at this time in my career I don't think I'll have children. I have over 30-some nephews and nieces and I will probably have to add to those down the line."

"I do know that I want to be able to devote time to the child and not have to leave it home for someone to take care of."

As her popularity puts more demands on her time, Crystal strives to keep work at a reasonable level. On

the inside of the country music world since a teenager, she knows what overworking can do to an artist.

"I've seen my sister having to be put in the hospital because she needs rest," Crystal relates. I never wanted that to happen to me."

Loretta has been both an inspiration and teacher. "I look at my sister as a living legend in country music," says Crystal. "No matter how many years and awards, she's still No. 1 to me. There's no way you can take anything away from her career."

"I grew up with my sister famous. I loved it. And I've learned a lot from watching my sister. I've learned a lot through her mistakes."

Perhaps witnessing Loretta's climb to the top has made it easier for Crystal to deal with fame. Fans shoving autograph books in her face while she's eating can be pesty, but Crystal admits she truly enjoys the attention, glamor and lights. It's a part of her now.

Yet there remains a certain honesty about Crystal Gayle. Many artists declare how fame and fortune are not their motivating factors in life. But somehow when Crystal Gayle says those things, you believe her.

"I enjoy what I'm doing," she says. "my music, entertaining people. What's really nice is when you're entertaining on stage and you can sense people enjoying it. Smiling faces."

"That's what I like."